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ABSTRACT

A study examined socially supportive messages to determine what situational constraints affect the types of support persons perceive as demanded by the situation. Data were gathered from 77 students enrolled in communication classes at a small private southwestern university. Subjects, provided with descriptions of four hypothetical situations involving distressed friends experiencing task-oriented conflicts and relational problems, were asked to record the two most important issues to address in order to provide support. Results revealed that recognized differences in distressing situations produced the need for specific types of support. Greater emphasis was placed on instrumental than affective concerns in response to task-oriented conflicts, while both instrumental and affective concerns were emphasized for situations involving relational problems. Findings also suggest that for task-oriented conflicts, persons assume that the reduction of the stressor (problem) will result in the reduction of the affective states of the distressed other. Concerning relational problems, findings suggest that persons define the situation as one in which two goals need to be accomplished: assisting the other in solving the problem and acknowledging the distressed state or feelings of the other. Continued investigations into the process of providing support and on identifying aspects of supportive situations appear to be called for. (Two tables of data are included; one appendix containing stimulus materials and 26 references are attached.) (KEH)

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Working Towards a Processual Definition of Social Support

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Abstract

Social support is a topic of wide research interest. Many definitions of the term "social support" have been presented. Such definitions exist within three broad frameworks: those noting the importance of social participation and integration, those pertaining to the outcomes of receiving social support, and those focusing on the process of social support provision. In this paper, each of these frameworks are discussed and critiqued in terms of their contributions to the conceptualization of the social support construct. In addition, it is argued that features of the process of providing social support need greater research attention. Evidence is provided indicating that constraints in situations in which social support is provided will affect the ways in which providers of support define the situation itself and, in turn, affect the types of support provided.

Working Towards a Processual Definition of Social Support

Over the past decade much has been written concerning the importance of the provision of social support to distressed persons. It has been stated that the existence of support contributes to peoples' emotional and physical well-being. For example, Myers, Lindenthal, and Pepper (1975) state that having a confidant to turn to for support, indeed, lessens the chances for psychological and physical problems later in life. An added benefit of social support, according to Sarason and Sarason (1982), is that persons receiving great amounts of social support tend to be more accepting of their own problems.

Moreover, Caplan (1976) states that social support serves as a positive force on the well-being of a distressed other. He argues that supportive resources serve distinct functions which result in a lessening of distressed states. Caplan argues that the supporter collects and disseminates information about the other's world and in turn serves as a feedback guidance system, as well as serving as a source of ideological validation concerning the other's beliefs, values, or behavioral codes. In addition, the supporter assists the other in solving problems and serves as a source for behavioral or tangible assistance. Finally, the supporter is available for affective assistance while serving as a haven when recuperation and rest are needed. Cobb (1976) supports these notions as he argues that social

support aids in coping with stress as it assists in keeping the distressed other's affect under control. Caplan also states that supporters serve as frames of reference and as means of validating the identity of the distressed other. Finally, supporters contribute to the other's mastery of emotion by enabling distressed others to understand their feelings.

Clearly, the provision of social support is a significant and important feature in peoples' social worlds. Unfortunately, the extant literature lacks a clear conceptualization of precisely what occurs when a person provides social support. Rather, social support has been descibed from within three different frameworks. In this paper these frameworks will be described and critiqued in terms of their utility in adequately explaning a necessary but largely ignored issue in the study of supportive interactions: what actually occurs when one person provides social support to a distressed other, or the communication of social support. Research evidence also will be provided supporting the need for consideration of the situational constraints involved in the process of providing support.

Definitions of social support

Research examining social support may be categorized into three distinct frameworks. The research in each of the three frameworks is driven by a distinct conceptualization of the characteristics of social support. That is, the research within each framework is driven by distinct

definitions of social support. The first of the three frameworks defines social support as the availability of resources, or what Gottlieb (1981b) describes as levels of social participation. The second framework defines social support in terms of the outcomes associated once some means of assistance has been provided. Gottlieb describes definitions within this framework as concentrating on ". . . a bi-product of people's interactions in a social network with particular structural properties" (p. 32). The third framework emphasizes the importance of recognizing specific features of the support provision process. Examples of definitions from each of these frameworks follows as well as a discussion of their potential utility in providing a clear conceptual understanding of social support.

Social support as levels of social participation and integration. Sarason and Sarason (1982) define social support as the " . . . help that would be available to an individual in different or stress-arousing situations" (p. 331). Lin, Simeone, Ensel, and Kuo (1979) utilize a similar definition. They describe social support as assistance hat is " . . . accessible to an individual through societal ties to other individuals, groups, and the larger community" (p. 109). These two definitions rely on the assumption that all potential relational partners are sources of social support regardless of whether any actual support is provided (i.e., the actual production of supportive messages does not appear to be of any importance within this framework). Moreover,

such definitions imply that social support is a tangible product which may be "transfered" from the supporter to the supportee. Simply having available resources for assistance may not result in a potential supporter actually providing assistance. Therefore, this framework for studying social support may be limited. A second limitation of this framework is that no description is given of what <u>is</u> provided to distressed others (i.e., features of supportive messages); therefore, this framework provides no conceptual clarity about what social support actually <u>is</u>.

<u>Outcome-focused definitions of social support</u>. The second framework in which definitions of social support may be categorized describes social support as an <u>outcome</u> of interaction with significant others. For example, Cobb (1976) states that social support enables a distressed other to feel loved, cared for, and held in high esteem. A second example of an outcome-focused definition of social support is provided by Tolsdorff (1976) who views social support as actions or behaviors that enable the target to meet particular goals or manage situational demands. Similarly, Pilisuk (1982) adds that social support involves

> those relationships among people that provide not only material help and emotional assistance, but also the sense that one is a continuing object of concern on the part of other people (p. 20).

These three definitions are consistent with what Carkhuff and Anthony (1979) describe as the act of "helping". They state that "helping" involves ". . . the act of promoting

constructive changes in an individual, which enhances the affective dimension of the individual's life and permits a greater degree of personal control over subsequent activities" (p. 3). However, these definitions do not contribute to a clearer conceptualization of social support because they are tautological and noninformative (Leavy, 1983). In actuality, they are no more informative of how change, control, enhancement of self-esteem, and so forth occur for distressed persons than an extremely simplistic definition Gottlieb (1981a) provides: social support consists of " . . . the help that helpers extend" (p. 209). Such definitions illustrate the lack of conceptual understanding of what social support is. However, the definitions previously described, although simplistic, suggest one important theme: the provision of social support is best understood as behavioral. However, none of the above definitions of social support indicate how one actually provides social support; these definitions fail to indicate what a support provider says or does that enhances a distressed other's feelings of being cared for and loved. Cushman and King (1986) argue that social support must be examined in terms of the process of communicating assistance to a distressed other in addition to its outcomes. Processual definitions of social support are described in the following section.

Processual definitions of social support. Processual definitions of social support share two common components

with the definitions provided above: (1) they include the availability of significant others as resources for assistance and (2) they focus on outcomes resulting from the provision of support. The definitions of social support discussed in this section are distinct from those focused on social participation and outcomes, however, because features of the act of providing social support are recognized. For example, Caplan (1974) describes social support as a product of an attachment between the provider and the distressed other such that emotional mastery is promoted. As a result of this relational attachment, feedback is provided concerning "action", "identity" and "guidance". Therefore, the provision of social support, according to Caplan, occurs whenever feedback is given to the distressed other. Two additional examples include the element of interpersonal interaction. Kahn and Antonucci (1980) as well as Norbeck, Lindsey, and Carriere (1981) indicate that social support involves the expression of positive regard or affect toward the distressed other, the affirmation of the other's behavior, expressed views, or perceptions, or the provision of tangible aid. Finally, Albrecht and Adelman (1987) add that social support involves the

> verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers which reduces the uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience (p. 19).

While these last three definitions are more inclusive than those discussed earlier, several problems exist with

their utility in helping to unravel the conceptual difficulties in defining social support. Consistent with the point made by Wilcox and Vernberg (1985), described earlier, these definitions are circular. They do not reveal how one actually provides social support. They merely discuss components associated with the outcomes in the social support process (such that social support merely is behavior that is supportive). These definitions do not indicate how, for example, one proceeds to reduce the uncertainty of a situation nor how a person actively assists a distressed other in gaining control over life experiences. While Albrecht and Adelman state that this end is achieved verbally or nonverbally, they fail to recognize the importance of the features of such messages. What their definition implies is that all messages have the potential to be supportive, that is, messages are supportive if uncertainty reduction and control are the outcomes. In other words, socially supportive messages still are distinguished by an outcome and not by some peculiar feature of the messages uttered for the purpose of providing support. Moreover, from this definition one can only assume that uncertainty reduction and control ultimately will lead one to enhanced self-esteem as Albrecht and Adelman's definition does not address this idea directly. A clear definition must be concrete and distinguish the concept which is defined from other other observables, i.e., distinguish social support from other types of communication

behavior or correlates such as cognition. Albrecht and Adelman's definition is an important one, however, because it was the first definition to recognize that social support is a communicative act.

Thus, a definition of social support that is directed towards the communicative features of the support provision process is needed as well as outcomes. Potential outcomes of the supporter's intention to be supportive may be in the form of assistance in relieving a person's distressed state through some form of direct action, through the provision of information or feedback, or in the demonstration of understanding the affective state of the other and/or the cause of the problem.

The actual provision of social support is a specific communicative goal that needs further attention, and attempts have been made to identify the communicative features of this particular type of interaction. For example, one goal indicated in Albrecht and Adelman's (1987) edited volume Communicating Social Support was to more closely examine the process of the provision of social support. The greatest contribution made by this book is its discussion of outcomes of social support provision in various contexts (e.g., in the workplace, with mentally ill patients, and with bereived persons). However, this book represents a point at which to begin exploring the communicative features of social support. Before closer examinations may be made of actual supportive messages (what

is said to a distressed other), a more careful examination of the situations in which support is provided is necessary in addition to surveying the potential constraints of such situations upon the types of social support persons actually provide. What is of great importance are the ways in which supporters define such situations and how these definitions will influence what they say and do. It seems reasonable that the ways in which supportive situations are defined will influence the nature of communication and then, consequently, the features of messages produced. Therefore, the first step in identifying the features of socially supportive communication will be developing an understanding of the nature of socially supportive situations.

The importance in examining features of support-giving situations. Constraints of situations, it has been argued, will affect the ways in which persons provide support to distressed others. For example, Gottlieb (1985) suggests that greater clarity is needed concerning the ways in which social support is provided under various circumstances in which the supportive interactions occur. This is a commonly shared view. For example, House and Kahn (1985), as well as Pearlin (1985), argue that different types of distressing situations will require different types of support. Because all supportive situations are not alike, different types of support are needed. As Gottlieb (1983) states, ". . . certain types of stressors call for specific types of supportive provisions" (p. 431). It has been argued widely

that social support is not a unidimensional construct (e.g., Gottlieb, 1983; Sarason & Sarason, 1985; Wilcox & Vernberg, 1985). House and Kahn argue that the functional content of social support will vary in the degree to which it " . . . flows from affect or emotional concern, instrumental or tangible aid, information, and the like" (p. 85). Thus, social support may be categorized, in a general sense, as addressing emotional/affective concerns or instrumental concerns (see also, Cohen & McKay, 1984). Different types of situations calling for social support may be distinguished by whether or not the person in distress requires affective or instrumental support.

Rationale and Description of the Present Study

The extant social support research is relatively void of studies examining how persons view distressed others in various situations. However, this appears to be an important issue to address before examining socially supportive messages. Certain features of distressing situations may create the need for certain types of support to be provided. For example, a situation involving relational conflict may call for the need for a very different type of support (i.e., affective as opposed to instrumental) than a situation in which the distressed other is seeking tangible solutions to a problem (even though a person's feelings may be at a risk in most situations calling for social support). The present study was conducted in order to determine what situational constraints

affect the types of support persons perceive as demanded by the situation. Prior to the conduct of this study, students at a small private university in the southwest provided examples of situations in their lives they found distressing. These situations were coded into general categories such as "problems associated with school and/or jobs", "relational problems" (e.g., parents, friends romantic interests), and "personal problems" (e.g., self-image, health) by independent coders.

Subjects and procedures

Persons enrolled in communication classes at a small private southwestern university participated in the study (N=77). They were provided with descriptions of four hypothetical situations involving distressed friends. The hypothetical situations were drawn from the stressors identified earlier by college-aged persons. The situations consisted of the following problems (stressors): difficulties experienced in finding employment following graduation, pressure to pursue a physically intimate relationship with a dating partner, student's feelings of being overwhelmed with demands of school, work, and extracurricular activities, and conflict experienced in a friendship relationship. Situations one and three concerned task-oriented conflicts and situations two and four focused on relational problems (see Appendix A for complete copies of the stimulus materials).

To determine the realism of the four hypothetical situations, subjects were asked to rate each of the situations through the use of 7-point Likert-type scales for how likely the situation is to happen, how realistic is the situation, how easy it is to imagine oneself in the situation, and how believable the situation is. Principal-components factor analyses were computed for the rated items in each of the four situations. For each situation, all items loaded onto single factors. Utilizing Chronbach's alpha, situations one through four received standardized alpha coefficients of .87, .86, .88, and .89 respectively. These results indicate that the four situations tap a single coherent construct. Moreover, it appears that the situations appear to be realistic. The average responses for the four situations ranged from 5.41 to 5.92 (see Tables 1 and 2 for summaries of these results).

Next, subjects were asked to write down what they felt were the two most important issues to address in order to provide support for their friend in each of the four situations. These responses were content analyzed in order to determine the extent to which subjects addressed instrumental and affective concerns across the four situations. The following definitions distinguish instrumental and affective concerns:

1. Instrumental concerns are those pertaining to:

    a. direct identification of the problem;

        e.g., "my friend must understand that we cannot force anybody to do anything that they

are not willing to do"

b. directly seeking additional information concerning the problem;

e.g., "why is s/he doing so many things at one time?"

c. provision of suggestions for immediate course of action to modify or solve problem;

e.g., "she must decide what she wants out of the relationship"

d. diversion of attention and/or responsibility away from problem.

e.g., "wait until she graduates and concentrate on that"

2. Affective concerns are those pertaining to:

a. recognition and/or validation of the worth of the affective state of the other;

e.g., "tell the friend that you understand his/her feelings"

b. directly seeking additional information concerning affective state of other;

e.g., "can you absolutely not live with what the other person is doing?"

c. directly recognizing the potential relational consequences resulting from action taken;

e.g., "she should not worry about the relationship ending, because if she sticks her neck out for her friend and it helps, the friend will probably be thankful"

d. validation of other's self-worth.

e.g., "s/he is a good, concerned friend"

3. An additional category was employed for those statements which deny the importance of addressing supportive concerns.

e.g., "the friend feels too much responsibility for directing behavior of others"

4. Additional coding rules:

a. often subjects will continue to elaborate upon their initial responses. The elaborated upon portion is not coded;

e.g., "has she mentioned anything to him about it? She needs to tell him how she feels or they will never have an open/honest relationship"

(the underlined portion is not coded)

b. subjects also may preface their responses in order to make the responses more clear. Such prefaces are not coded;

e.g., "if the person REALLY cares about you, you should be able to tell him/her your concerns"

(the underlined portion is not coded)

Results and discussion

As this piece of research was meant to be a pilot study and the concern was with simply obtaining a "feel" for the type of issues subjects indicated as important (either instrumental or affective), no statistical analyses were used in examining the open-ended data. Furthermore, the researcher had no expectations for how this data should be analyzed, i.e., it was not readily apparent whether this data would lend itself to measures of association or difference. In other words, the researcher had no way of knowing, given the lack of theoretical guidance in this area, whether subjects' responses across situations should be similar or different. Therefore, similar responses merely were categorized and tallied. In the first hypothetical situation, involving a friend's distress resulting from difficulties in finding employment following graduation, subjects generated 136 statements (91%) focused

on instrumental concerns, eight statements (5%) focused on affective concerns, and six were denial statements (5%). Four subjects failed to provide a second situation issue to address in the situation. In response to the second situation, involving a friend's distress concerning pressure to pursue a more physically intimate relationship with a dating partner, subjects provided 66 instrumental responses (46%), 72 affective responses (50%), and five denial reponses (3%). Eleven subjects provided only one major issue to be addressed.

The third situation concerned a friend feeling overwhelmed with his/her involvement in school, work, and extracurricular activities. Subjects provided 137 instrumental statements (90%), seven affective statements (5%), and seven denial statements (5%). Three subjects only provided one issue they felt was important to address. Finally, the fourth situation involved conflict a friend was having with another good friend. There were 92 statements of instrumental concern (63%), 40 statements of affective concern (28%), and 13 denial statements (8%). Eleven subjects only provided one issue to be addressed.

The results of this study indicate several important conclusions. Earlier in this paper, it was argued that the constraints of distressing situations will affect the types of social support persons provide to others. The results of this study indicate that persons appear to recognize that differences in distressing situations produce the need for

specific types of support. Subjects placed a greater emphasis on instrumental concerns that on affective concerns in response to those situations focused more on task-oriented stressors, (situations one and three). It appears that when confronted with such situations persons are highly focused on addressing the problem causing the stress directly and generating solutions for remedying the problem and may ultimately express much less concern for the affective states of the distressed other. Perhaps persons assume that the reduction of the stressor will result in the reduction of the affective state of the distressed other. Such a conclusion, at this time however, is speculative and the distressed other's perceptions of the actual supportiveness of such concerns are unknown.

For the situations involving relational problems, (situations two and four) both instrumental and affective concerns were emphasized (with an approximate ratio of 60-40 for instrumental concerns as opposed to affective concerns). This finding indicates that in response to these situations, persons are aware of the importance of solving the immediate problem creating the stress in addition to the recognition or validation of the feelings of the other. It seems that these persons are defining the situatiion as one in which there are two communicative goals to be accomplished: (1) assisting the other in solving the problem and (2) acknowledging the distressed state, or feelings, of the other.

Perhaps one of the more interesting results from the present study is that some persons, in responding to the hypothetical situations, denied the need to address certain issues in order to provide support for their friend. Thirty-one responses (5%) were coded as denial of the importance of such issues. Although this is a small percentage of responses, it appears that some persons are operating in ways very differently from those persons who recognize the importance of addressing both instrumental and affective concerns in supportive contexts. The existence of such potential individual differences has not been explored and explained theoretically.

Brammer (1985) argues that the messages helpers produce largely are dependent upon individual characteristics of the helper, yet little is known about these characteristics. He states that the helper's intentions in the situation are going to exert the greatest influence on the type of message produced. The notion of intention underlying message production is consistent with the constructivist view of communication. According to Delia, O'Keefe, and O'Keefe (1982), human communication is " . . . guided by context-relevent intentions and beliefs produced by schemes of interpretation" (p. 155). Thus, persons organize communicative behavior into strategies for carrying out an intention based upon the interpretation of

the situation or context in combination with like experiences. Communication strategies consist of the actual discourse used in fulfilling interpersonal goals (intentions). In situations where help-intended communication occurs, Elliott, Stiles, Shiffman, Barker, Burstein, and Goodman (1982) contend that the helper demonstrates the intention to provide some type of psychological assistance. Specifically, this assistance is provided through some type of supportive message.

Albrecht and Adelman (1987) state that communication in supportive contexts indeed is an important area of study. The selection of language is important for the interaction in order for it to result in the desired outcomes. Of great concern, they contend, is that supportive message strategies themselves have not been examined in much detail in extant research. What are attainable are mere descriptions of what is achieved once supportive messages are produced (the outcomes) rather than the actual contents of the messages. For example, Brickman, Kidder, Coates, Rabinowitz, Cohn, and Karuza (1983) state that supportive messages aid in the distressed other attaining feelings of competence and control. Similarly, Albrecht (1987) describes supportive messages as serving four distinct purposes. First, these messages enable a distressed person to examine the source of the stress (stressor) or to effectively manage the stressor (e.g., to eventually solve the problem). Messages of this type are consistent with what House (1981) describes as

informational support. Second, supportive messages evaluate a person's ability to manage the stressor and ultimately contribute to the enhancement of the skills for obtaining independent control over the stressor. This type of message is consistent with House's description of appraisal support. Third, supportive messages may indicate reassurance or acceptance on behalf of the distressed other. The supporter serves as a "sounding board" such that the distressed person is allowed to vent feelings or anxieties. This is consistent with what House describes as emotional support. Finally, Albrecht argues that supportive messages indicate the provision of some means of tangible assistance, described by House as instrumental support.

Thus, in order to more fully address the social support issue the notion of the process of providing support must be of greater concern. What is needed at this point is research focused on identifying aspects of supportive situations. This pilot investigation represents a small step in this direction. Once more is known about supportive situations and how those situations constrain peoples' intentions, we may begin to truely study that which Albrecht and Adelman (1987) suggest: Communicating social support.

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Appendix A

Stimulus Materials

Situation 1:

Imagine that a friend of yours tells you that s/he is very worried about her/his upcoming graduation because s/he has been unsuccessful in finding a job. Your friend says that s/he is wanting a job that will be interesting and utilize her/his skills acquired in college and has had several interviews but never has been asked for a follow-up interview. Your friend tells you that s/he is not sure what goes wrong in the interviews and is getting very concerned because graduation is only two months away.

Situation 2:

Imagine a friend of yours tells you that s/he is having problems with the person s/he is dating. Your friend says that s/he really likes this person and wants to continue the relationship, but the other person wants the relationship to progress to a much more intimate level. S/he states that s/he is not ready for this and feels that physical intimacy at this point in the relationship is wrong, but does not know how to tell the other person this without being perceived as "strange". Your friend says that s/he is afraid that the other person will want to end the relationship if s/he does not give in.

Situation 3:

Imagine that a friend of yours tells you that s/he is really concerned about the amount of pressure on her/him. S/he says that s/he is taking a full load of classes, is trying to keep a 3.8 grade point average, is working 12 hours a week at a job s/he really hates but needs to keep it to stay in school, and is very active in several organizations on campus. Your friend tells you that s/he is afraid that her/his grades are suffering because there always seem to be papers and projects to complete and exams to take.

Situation 4:

Imagine that a friend tells you that s/he is upset because s/he is having a major conflict with another friend of hers/his and is very concerned that the conflict will result in the ending of the relationship. Your friend says that the other person is very angry with her/him because your friend feels that the other person is making many regrettable mistakes. Your friend tells you that the other person is engaging in dangerous activities and is associating with the wrong people. Your friend says that s/he has tried to talk to the other person and explain her/his concerns, but it only results in the other person getting very angry with your friend.

Table 1

	Standardized Alpha	Mean Rating
Situation 1	.87	5.70
Situation 2	.86	5.80
Situation 3	.88	5.92
Situation 4	.89	5.41

Table 2

Principal-Components Factor Analysis

		Unrotated Eigenvalues	Explained Variance
Situation 1		2.87	.71
Factor Loadings:			
Likely to happen	.89		
Realistic	.88		
Easy to imagine myself in	.73		
Believable	.87		
Situation 2		2.84	.71
Factor Loadings:			
Likely to happen	.86		
Realistic	.91		
Easy to imagine myself in	.65		
Believable	.93		
Situation 3		2.99	.75
Factor Loadings:			
Likely to happen	.88		
Realistic	.93		
Easy to imagine myself in	.70		
Believable	.92		
Situation 4		3.01	.75
Factor Loadings:			
Likely to happen	.89		
Realistic	.93		
Easy to imagine myself in	.71		
Believable	.92		